

A SEASON TO STOP, LOOK & LISTEN



Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" Mark 5:30-31

As I write, my dad has returned from the hospital to rest as comfortably as possible in his own bed, surrounded by those who love him, until his final breath. Seven long years have spanned the journey from losing keys to losing appetite, not to mention so many memories that will now be ours, his survivors, to preserve and cherish. As one who transformed from a high school slacker to an accomplished interior designer, my father took pride in being someone who "made things happen" and pushed us to be likewise. In large part, to be sure, my dad imparted an impulse to design, to create, to achieve...for which I am grateful.

It may be, however, that among the most important lessons I'll receive from Dad have come in this final season, one with few words and no monuments or creations to point to. Was it making any difference to sit alongside my father, strapped in his motionless wheelchair, groping for things to say to him and clueless about whether anything was registering? When I feigned polite response to his incomprehensible mumbling or held up old photographs to his wandering eyes with my cumbersome laptop? When I held his hand, did he know that I was the one whose hand he himself used to hold?

To simply be present with another human being, without agenda or tangible return, is woe-fully counterintuitive for someone like me. More

to the crux of things, it's hard to take myself out of the equation. Little inclined am I to stop, look, and listen for God in human spaces—territory I'd rather control for my own purposes (including ministry), or at least finesse for maximal comfort. Indeed, the disciples in Mark 5 were uncomfortable when their rabbi stopped, en route to save Jairus' dying daughter, to see who touched his cloak. Doing the will of the Father, Jesus was not bound by time or sense of urgency. Faith enabled him to pay attention to the person in front of him.

After some 18 years of overseeing outreach ministry for my church, I have received from my pastors and elders a prescription for a long overdue sabbatical, but one of an unconventional nature. Coined by one of our elders as my "reverse sabbatical," it will be a year free of outside speaking engagements, consultations, or writing projects. My original charge, begun in 1994, was to "listen to the congregation, learn the community, build local (and some national) relationships, and "give form" to ministry which, as one of my pastors astutely pointed out, is not the same as creating and managing ministry. Moreover, I was to take on this role pastorally, which means paying attention to what God is doing among his flock.

Over the years, my time and attention have been diverted to national opportunities to serve

the church at large—not necessarily a negative, as my comrades are quick to affirm. However, preoccupied with external endeavors, I find myself offering an ecclesiology and missiology that can, and has, become increasingly abstract. It is well and good for me to speak of the centrality of the church in urban mission, or the relationship between congregational life and prophetic witness, but if I am not relationally rooted in, and attentive to, the life of my own community, then my words ring hollow.

My pastor, Sharon Huey, summed up my "reverse sabbatical" this way: "Craig, help our *congregation* to love San Francisco" (emphasis mine). Inherent in this exhortation is a renewed love for my city, as well as for my fellow parishioners. The two are inextricably connected. I will learn to love San Francisco anew through the lens and experiences of my pew mates as they follow Christ faithfully in every place, whether boardroom, classroom, or on the street. "Do more seeing and listening than talking," she added.

As I sit bedside by my father, holding his

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hand and looking into his face, I want to notice the glimmer of response, the break of a smile, the squeeze of the hand, or the incomprehensible mumble that likely has meaning. I want to see, in this aging, mortal frame, the father—with God-given spirit—who raised me and gave of himself to many good things. In this season, amid the pain of loss, I hope to gain new eyes and ears to recognize God in the people and places in front of me.



Craig Wong is the executive director of Grace Urban Ministries in San Francisco. He invites your feedback at onbeingthechurch@gum.org.